

Proposed chapter for Griffin book on terrorism.
Daniel Ellsberg, May 23, 2007

U.S. Nuclear Terrorism

Long after the ending of the Cold War, the chance that some nuclear weapons will kill masses of innocent humans somewhere, before very long, may well be higher than before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

One phase of the Nuclear Age, the period of superpower arms race and confrontation, has indeed come to a close (though the possibility of all-out, omnicidal exchange of alert forces triggered by a false alarm remains, inexcusably, well above zero). But another dangerous phase now looms, the era of nuclear proliferation and with it, an increased likelihood of regional nuclear wars, accidents, and nuclear terrorism.

The latter prospect is posed not just by “rogue” states and non-state terrorists but by the United States (among others), which has led by example for sixty years in making nuclear threats that amount to terrorism, and which may well be first or among the first to carry such threats out.

Averting catastrophe—not only the spread of weapons but their lethal use—will require major shifts in attitude and policy in every one of the nuclear weapon states, declared and undeclared. But such change is undoubtedly most needed, and must come first, in the United States and Russia. Looking specifically at the United States, a whole set of policies persist that have long tended to *encourage* proliferation.

Perhaps most dangerously, potential proliferators are led by past and present American doctrine and behavior to consider—among the possible, acceptable and valuable uses of nuclear weapons—the issuance and possible execution of nuclear first-use threats: i.e., the “option” of threatening to initiate nuclear attacks, and if necessary of carrying out such threats. Precisely that example is set by repeated statements over the last year by President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, echoed by leading members of Congress, that “all options are on the table” in their determination to prevent Iranian nuclear weapons capability. Such threats legitimize the prospect of first-use by any nuclear weapons state, and they have the perverse effect of challenging states without nuclear weapons, including Iran, to acquire them: to be able to deter or preempt nuclear attack, or to threaten first-use on their own.

Years after the former members of the Warsaw Pact, including Russia, began asking to be admitted to NATO, and after China has acquired most-favored-nation status, the United States still refuses to adopt a policy of “no-first-use.” This means that the United States refuses to make a commitment to never under any circumstance initiate a nuclear attack. This is also true of Britain, France and now Russia, which abandoned its no-first-use doctrine in late 1993, citing the United States-NATO example and reasoning in doing so.

This is not only a matter of words, as some suppose. Despite sensible moves on both sides beginning in late 1991 to remove tactical nuclear weapons from the surface navy and from ground units—responding to realistic fears in both leaderships of “loose nukes” in the Soviet Union—both states continue to deploy sizeable numbers of tactical weapons on air bases and still larger numbers in reserve storage. Virtually all of these weapons are vulnerable to nuclear attack. Thus, they are weapons *only* for first-use or for use against non-nuclear opponents.

So long as these continue to be components of the nuclear arsenals of both the United States and Russia, even after their own overarching confrontation has ended, there is simply no logical argument for denying either the legitimacy or reasonableness of nuclear arsenals sized and shaped to the same ends in other countries. [This is especially true for countries such as Pakistan and Israel, who face regional opponents with much larger conventional forces. This, after all, was the historic rationale for NATO’s reliance on first-use nuclear threats.]

In May 1990, a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir was plausibly feared by US officials, and little has happened since to reduce the prospect of a recurrence. But neither then nor later was the United States in a position to invoke an internationally-accepted norm against Pakistan’s tacit first-use threats, since Pakistan was so clearly imitating US and NATO behavior.

U.S. Nuclear Weapons Use

Later in 1990, after Saddam Hussein attacked Kuwait, not one of the four nuclear states militarily arrayed against Iraq in the Gulf War—the United States, Britain, France and Israel—refrained from tacit threats to initiate nuclear attacks under some circumstances. Under public questioning, high US and other Allied officials—including Vice President Quayle, Secretary of Defense Cheney and General Schwarzkopf—pointedly refused to rule out the possible first-use of nuclear weapons against Iraq: in particular, if the Iraqis used chemical weapons extensively, which was regarded as highly possible. Thus, nuclear weapons *were used* as a threat against a non-nuclear opponent during the Gulf War.

By the same token, contrary to the belief of most Americans that US nuclear weapons have never been used in the fifty years since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, American Presidents have employed nuclear threats over a dozen times, generally in secret from the US public, in crises and limited wars in Indochina, East Asia, Berlin, Cuba and the Middle East.¹ The Soviet Union, Israel, and Pakistan have used nuclear weapons in the same way.

¹ See Daniel Ellsberg, “Call to Mutiny,” Introduction to *Protest and Survive*, ed. E.P. Thompson and Dan Smith (Monthly Review Press, 1981): <http://www.ellsberg.net/content/view/16/32/>
For a more recent list of threats, see “U.S. Nuclear threats: Then and now,” Robert S. Norris and Hans M Kristensen, *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, September/October 200, pp. 69-71:
http://www.thebulletin.org/print_nn.php?art_ofn=so06norris

In each of these cases, nuclear weapons were *used* in the exact sense in which a gun is used when it is pointed at someone's head in a confrontation, whether or not the trigger is pulled. To get one's way without having to pull the trigger is a major reason for acquiring the gun and, often, for brandishing it.

[Some of these nuclear threats were probably bluffs, some probably not. Most were ambiguous, some were rejected, some were believed to be successful, including those in the Gulf War. But all of them involved real dangers, short-run or long, to some degree for both sides; intimidation on this scale is never without mutual risk.]

One of the successes, the Pentagon concluded, was the Gulf War. Saddam Hussein did not, after all, use the chemical weapons he then possessed—some on alert missiles—either against Allied troops or against Israel. Fear of Israeli nuclear reprisal may have been an especially effective deterrent. But this success, if true, came at a high price. The message that the United States and its allies regarded such threats both as legitimate and as successful was not lost on potential proliferators, who could imagine themselves either as receiving or as imitating such threats themselves in the future.

Yet another spur to proliferation was the accompanying thought, among Third World observers, that Iraq might have been spared both these nuclear threats and the heavy conventional bombing it received if Saddam Hussein's efforts to acquire a nuclear weapon had already been successful. That inference became inescapable after 2003, with the dramatic difference in the US responses to a supposed nuclear weapons program in Iraq and an actual successful one in North Korea. (A conventional or nuclear US attack in the near future on a yet-non-nuclear Iran would underline that point once again for the rest of the world).

[And once proliferation has occurred, new nuclear states are likely to use the same ambiguous first-use threats, in the same ways and with the same risks of provocation, commitment, and of possible failure and escalation.

This observation rejects the common, condescending implication that significant risk of nuclear war will emerge for the first time only with the acquisition of nuclear weapons by "irresponsible, immature" leaders in the Third World. But it also presumes that the risk of nuclear war has been higher over the last sixty years than the world public was allowed to learn.

With nuclear weapons in the hands of a greater number of leaders, individually no more but *no less* reckless than most American presidents of the last sixty years, the long-term risk of nuclear explosions launched by nuclear weapons states is higher still. There is no basis here for limiting the danger of such attacks exclusively to non-state, "terrorist" groups. The latter real and growing danger must be seen not as replacing but as adding to (and being enhanced by) the dangers of existing and broadened possession of nuclear weapons by states, led by our own.]

Nuclear Insanity

“Insane” is not too strong a word for arguments that occupy planners in the Pentagon and otherwise-serious arms control analysts in favor of maintaining thousands of thermonuclear warheads in the US arsenal—hence thousands in Russia—in a world where neither any longer has a superpower adversary. After two generations of a strategic nuclear arms race that was the clearest example in human history of a social process psychotically divorced from reality or an urge to survive, such advisors have clearly lost any conception of what a nuclear bomb is or does.

[They have forgotten, if they ever knew, that pictures of Nagasaki in the late summer of 1945 show what happens to a medium-sized city when just the detonator to a modern, thermonuclear weapon is exploded in its midst.] Almost no Americans are aware of the elementary fact that every thermonuclear fusion weapon, or H-bomb—which comprise all of our strategic arsenal, still over 6,000 warheads—requires a Nagasaki-type fission warhead, or A-bomb, to set it off.

The earliest thermonuclear blasts released 1,000 times the explosive power of the A-bomb detonator that triggered it, which was in turn 2,000 times more powerful than the largest “blockbuster” of World War II. The latter destroyed a city block with ten tons of TNT. The second fusion explosion, in February 1954, had a yield equivalent to 15 million tons of TNT, over seven times greater than the tonnage of all the bombs dropped by the United States in World War II, including the A-bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That single bomb—the first test of a droppable H-bomb—had greater explosive power than that of all the shells and bombs together in all the wars of human history.

It is in that unearthly light that bomb designer Herbert York, the first director of Livermore Nuclear Weapons Laboratory and later President Carter’s test ban negotiator, gave an unfamiliar but plausible answer to the Cold War question: How many survivable, deliverable nuclear warheads would it take to deter an adversary rational enough to be deterred at all? York’s answer was: “Somewhere in the range of 1, 10, or 100”; and, he conjectured, “I think it is closer to 1 than it is to 100.”

[York also suggested another way of arriving at an upper limit for an appropriate nuclear arsenal. He proposed that we ask ourselves what is the upper limit of destructive power within a short period of time that we would want a single state, or a single individual heading that state, to control. Suppose that upper limit was the ability to inflict, in a day or two, the full scale of destruction of World War II. Surely it would be challenging to justify a capability to inflict immediate damage that was greater than that.

The criterion would imply, York calculated, an upper limit to a survivable nuclear force of about 100 thermonuclear warheads. It might be as many as 200. It would certainly not allow 1000 warheads, or 500.]

[Thus, even by Cold War standards of requirements for deterring nuclear attack, applied to present and foreseeable conditions: what nuclear-weapon state can really make a plausible case for possessing as many nuclear weapons as the 200 deployed by Britain or China, or the 348 deployed by France? Not France, or Britain, or China; nor the United States, nor Russia.

Even the smaller of these states continue to maintain and to expand arsenals so large as to mock intolerably the presumption of the Non-Proliferation Treaty that none of the other states of the world, the non-nuclear-weapon states, has any compelling or legitimate reason to possess even one nuclear weapon. That can be said even of India (40-50 assembled warheads), or Israel (commonly estimated at 200 warheads, but with other estimates ranging from 300-600).]

Meanwhile, the United States arsenal—10,000 warheads, nearly 6000 operational—is *one hundred times* the maximum suggested by York. The Russian stockpile--16,000 warheads, over 7000 operational, is even larger. Even after reductions currently agreed under the current Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty by 2012, the operational warheads alone--1700-2200 “operationally deployable” warheads, for each (apart from the much larger number of inactive/reserve weapons “on the shelf”)—will be ten to twenty times the York levels.²

And they will still be larger in 2013 and beyond than the arsenals that either deployed in 1968, when they signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty. By their behavior, the two nuclear superpowers have been saying to every non-nuclear-weapon state over the forty years since then: “You don’t need a single nuclear weapon ever. We need thousands indefinitely.”

The Need for an Effective International Norm and Practical Disincentives

Without an effective international norm against both acquisition and threat/use of nuclear weapons, there cannot be an adequate basis for consensual, coordinated international action to prevent such acquisition or use, including intrusive inspection “any time any place,” with comprehensive sanctions against violators of the norm. [But there cannot be such a norm, a true international consensus on values and obligations, so long as the current nuclear weapons states project an indefinite extension of a two-tier system in which they are subject to a different set of rules, or in effect, no rules at all.]

² All estimates, except for Israel, from Cirincione, *op. cit.*, Table 5.5, p. 98.